

Will Rogers Ranch, Main House
14253 Sunset Boulevard
Pacific Palisades
Los Angeles County
California

HABS No. CA-2273-A

HABS
CAL.
19-PAP4,
1-4-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL DATA
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington DC 20013-7127

HAB5
CAL,
19-PAPA,
1-A-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

WILL ROGERS RANCH, MAIN HOUSE

HABS No. CA-2273-A

Location: Will Rogers State Historic Park, 14253 Sunset Blvd., Pacific Palisades, Los Angeles County, California.

USGS Quadrangle: Topanga Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: Zone 11: 3,769,050 m North; 360,470 m East.

Significance: Built in the 1920-30s, this rustic craftsman-influenced example of affluent California ranch architecture served as the weekend retreat and eventually the permanent family home of humorist, writer, and actor Will Rogers (1879-1935) during his most successful years.

Description: Built in stages beginning in 1924, the two-story frame house (or lodge) today consists of two rectangular wings, about 64' x 50', separated by servants' quarters and a sheltered patio. The south wing was the original six-room dwelling built to Rogers' specifications: "Just a plain, what [we] used to call a box, house not weatherboarded, just 12" boards up on edge and the batting nailed across the cracks. [I] want it white with the green roof, and a big, wide porch . . . It's to be very plain and ordinary, all on one floor . . . The only thing we want is room and shade." This block contained three bedrooms, a large living room, and a kitchen on one level. In 1935, a wing was added to the northwest corner of this building, which included two bedrooms, a kitchen and bath.

The north wing--added in 1930, the year the Rogers moved to the ranch permanently--provided the family larger private quarters. Modeled after a Montana sheep ranch Rogers had seen and liked, the overall form is long and low, with extensive use of stone and wood. The exterior walls are vertical board and batten, and horizontal board. An overlay of roof lines is created by the low-pitched, wood-shingled gable roof of the main blocks, coupled with one- and two-story shed-roofed porches and balconies, all of which feature deep, exposed eaves. An irregular pattern of openings include casement and sash windows, and single and double doors, many of which open onto the patio. Many windows and doors in the north wing were salvaged from the termite-infested Beverly Hills house the Rogers departed. Stone is a prominent material, used in the three massive chimneys and patio, as well as for the seven dramatic fireplaces on the interior.

Notable interior features include the open rafters of the living room, with a modified king-post truss system that is "supported" at the wall juncture with horse-head carved brackets. The bathroom tile was handcrafted, designed to incorporate anthropomorphic imagery such as soap-dish snails. Wagon-wheel chandeliers are suspended from the ceiling. Several of the rooms in the north wing continued to meet Rogers' modest vertical paneling, while others were finished in lath and plaster. Later still, modifications included raising the roof of the south wing, the addition of a sun room to the master bedroom, and a new room was added above the servants quarters for Jimmy Rogers, whose room was lost to make way for a paneled library and sitting room in the north

wing. In all, there were ten bedrooms and bathrooms in addition to service and entertaining spaces.

History:

Prior to the construction of the existing ranch house, in 1922 Rogers built a two-story cabin on the then-isolated Santa Monica Mountains property for use on weekends; after subsequent construction, it housed guests and servants.

A.C. Semrow and Lee Adamson, the latter a civil engineer and Rogers' brother-in-law, are credited with the design and construction of the original one-story ranch house in 1927. Modifications and additions continued, however, until Rogers' death in 1935.

In keeping with the informal Oklahoma ranching tradition of Rogers' upbringing, after completion of the north wing the south wing of the house was used for entertaining, accommodating guests, and as a kitchen; these public spaces were not connected to the private quarters of the north wing. The absence of a separate dining room is evidence of Rogers' preference for informality. The family ate on the patio unless inclement weather forced them to the dining table in the south-wing living room.

Thus, a succession of architects, contractors, and craftsmen left their mark in the building's cabinetry, fireplaces, and wood flooring. Rogers was particularly gratified to employ a large number of laborers at a time when the Depression left so many persons out of work. The most notable handiwork is by Los Angeles architect W. Asa Hudson, whose firm, and especially architect Frederick Ken Reese (ca. 1908-84), designed the north wing. Noteworthy among the local craftsmen who customized the modifications was California designer Ernest A. Batchelder, who installed the tile and bathroom fittings.

The Will Rogers State Historic Park property includes a guest house (CA-2273-B) and stable featuring a central rotunda (CA-2273-C); historically, it also included a one-story cabin with double fireplace completed in 1935, two polo fields, laundry, a small golf course, tennis court, and numerous fenced corrals nestled into the adjacent valleys. Rogers' widow, Betty, occupied the ranch until her death in 1944. The property was soon turned over to the California State Parks System, according to her wishes. The house is maintained as it existed when Will Rogers was living there, and it contains family furnishings and memorabilia. It is open to the public as an historic-house museum.

Sources:

Interview with household manager Emil Sandmeier and Jim Rogers, youngest son, (8 March 1976), Will Rogers State Historic Park archives.

Building permit records, Los Angeles City Hall of Records.

Letters from Will Rogers to Lee Adamson (n.d. but ca. 1930), WRSHP archives.

Interview with architect Frederick K. Reese (January 26, 1978/1988)

Betty Rogers. *Will Rogers: His Wife's Story* (NY: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1941)

Palisadian Post (newspaper)

Historian:

Pamela Raffetto

Seasonal Interpretive Specialist, NPS

Will Rogers State Historic Park